

# How the life of one shogunate official can help you have a more fulfilling life

Research has shown that young Japanese people have lower levels of self-satisfaction than youth in other countries, with less than half of young Japanese stating that they feel satisfied with themselves or feel that they have strong qualities\*1. In comparison, around 80% of youth in Korea, North America and Europe state that they have good self-esteem. Perhaps one reason Japanese youth have lower self-esteem is due to the particular social constraints they face in Japan. People in Japan are now discussing whether or not married couples should be required to have the same surname, and the rise of telecommuting due to COVID-19 is expanding people's potential to engage in other work on the side. Many mistake Japanese tradition for being behind the constraints on such ideas up to now. In fact, married couples only began sharing surnames in the late 19th century, and the concept of the now-collapsing lifelong employment system only emerged in the 20th century. When we consider this in the light of Japan's long history, neither of these concepts can really be described as "traditions" but are rather closer to exceptions to the cultural rule. During the 270-year-long Edo Period, the era between the early 17th century and the mid-to-late 19th century, married couples each kept their own surnames, and Japan was home to a great variety of different ways of life.

A good example of that diversity can be found in a man named Ōta Naojirō. Born in 1749 in what is now Nakachō in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward, Naojirō became a vassal of the Tokugawa Shogunate at the age of 17 alongside his father. This was around the time the famous statesman Tanuma Okitsugu was rising to a prominent position within Shogunate. Naojirō received a stipend from the Shogunate, and used that to provide for the members of the Ōta clan. Conversely, it could be said that by hiring him, the Shogunate was able to keep Naojirō under its control through his family.



Portrait of kyōka poet Yomono Akara

Naojirō was known by eight pseudonyms: Ōta Nampo, Yomono Akara, Shokusanjin, Neboke-sensei, Hajintei, Kyōka-en, Yamanote-no-bakabito, and Fūrei-sanjin. He used each of these aliases for different cultural pursuits. As a writer, he was known by the name Ōta Nampo; he wrote kyōka – a form of comic tanka poetry – under the name Yomono Akara; and he used the name Neboke-sensei as a member of a group who enjoyed kyōshi, a humorous style of poetry written in the Chinese style. These eight pseudonyms were connected to Naojirō such that he was known no matter which he used, and his talents were widely recognized in all of the fields in which he was active. In other words, he didn't use these pseudonyms to pretend to be someone different; he used them as "avatars"\*2 of himself – as a means of expressing his multiple talents. The worlds in which his avatars flourished were worlds free of the control of the Shogunate. Samurai were not the only people who lived through the use of personal avatars: Iwase Samuru was a merchant who became famous for his avatar, for which he went by the pseudonym Santō Kyōden.

Hosei University Professor Yuko Tanaka, who also serves as the university's president, is conducting research into how to harness the diversity of the Edo period, as seen in life of Ōta Naojirō, and how to utilize it to the benefit of people living in modern society. People's image of the Edo period tends to include the concept of a strictly-followed class structure, but it had a diversity that allowed people to demonstrate their talents to the fullest extent. If the young people of today could create their own avatars in the style of the people of Edo, that would surely lead to them developing their own talents and improving their self-esteem.

\*1 Cabinet Office. "Current Attitudes of Youth in Japan – What can be seen when comparing with other countries." Here, "youth" is defined as people between the ages of 13 and 29.

\*2 The term avatar originates in the word used to describe the ten different primary incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu.



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かつての江戸時代から今日まで、東京という地域に持続している文化的英知を、現在の地球的課題の解決に応用する研究を進めている。

